

Bookmakers

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by Christopher Dickey

The Ultimate Auction

DAVID OBST—agent for John Dean, Marvel Comics, Tammy Wynette, Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman, Julie Nixon and David Eisenhower, Bob Woodward and (until recently) Carl Bernstein—has just sold himself.

About six weeks ago Random House offered him his own publishing imprint, "David Obst Books," his own choice of editors and a staff, to produce a list of from seven to ten books a year. Essentially, as he put it, he would have "total ownership." Random would distribute, but there would be a minimum of editorial interference.

It seemed an attractive proposition, but, of course, it might be improved. So Obst approached Simon and Schuster, the publishing house that has profited most from his clients (from *The Final Days*

and *Blind Ambition*, for instance). He has even been quoted in *Esquire* as saying that S&S president Richard Snyder "owes his entire career to me," but a source close to the action says the offer Simon and Schuster finally made was "nothing like as good as Random's."

As news of all this spread through the industry the question arose whether Obst's agency would be dissolved or could be sold to a company such as International Creative Management, which has swallowed several agencies in the past.

Obst dithered and worried: in the same day—in the same hour—telling one person he was going to Random House and another that he wasn't. (Monday he told a caller his wife Linda had just been made the senior editor of *The New York Times Magazine*. "At least one of us has a job," he said wearily.) Finally last Thursday, after spending the entire previous after-

noon in consultation with his lawyer, Obst told this reporter that he would definitely accept the Random House offer, and that rather than sell his agency whole or in part he would help make the best possible arrangement for each of his clients individually.

Meanwhile, Robert Bernstein, president of Random House and not so instantly voluble as his new colleague, would not comment.

If and when Obst is officially hired by Random it will not be for his managerial prowess (reportedly nonexistent), or because his former clients could all reliably be expected to sign with him as a publisher. It is expected, rather, that Obst will act as a kind of literary lightning rod, attracting ideas and authors, and using his well-known talent for conceptualizing, packaging and presentation to get them on the market. □